

# THE **LORE** BOOK

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*Platinum Games nails the combat and fails its heroine*

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# Bayonetta 3 Broke My Heart

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It's hard to review a video game where you hated the ending, because of course, you can't cover that in the review.

It's also hard to review a video game when it's the third entry in a series of which you're a super fan, to the point that it feels almost like a personal insult when the ending doesn't line up with where you wanted the series to go. Unfortunately, that is the exact situation I face in reviewing Bayonetta 3. PlatinumGames' newest entry in the Bayonetta story opens with a monologue, but it's not from Bayonetta. Instead, the first voice we hear is a brand-new character named Viola; she's a teenage, punk rock witch in training who serves as the secondary protagonist. This story may appear to be about women, since you only play as Bayonetta, Viola, and (briefly) Jeanne, but this opening monologue is all about Viola's father — an important piece of foreshadowing, because the patriarchy ends up playing a significant role this time around. When Viola was a kid, her dad told her about the multiverse, leaving her with this haunting thought: "I'd always believed there was only one truth. But — what if some other version of me, on a distant world, was searching for all possibilities? And what if, when all the possibilities were overlaid, the path that

stood out the clearest was the real truth?" At this point, if you're brand new to all things Bayonetta, you might be worried that Viola's monologue is referring to the prior two games, which have deeply confusing lore. Guess what? None of that lore is relevant to Bayonetta 3. That's because this game has entirely new confusing lore. As Viola delivers this opening monologue, a scene plays out that depicts the shocking death of Bayonetta. Viola screams in horror, then uses a magical necklace to transport herself to another corner of the multiverse — another time and place, where our heroine Bayonetta and her pals are still alive, still kicking butt, and still capable of saving the day. Or so Viola hopes, since she wants nothing more than to prevent Bayonetta's demise. Like Viola at the game's outset, I found myself haunted by the implications of the multiverse — the idea that, with all these different versions of Bayonetta overlaid on top of each other, the truth about her would finally become clear. The end of the game hammered that truth home, and it was ugly: Turns out, the fantasy of Bayonetta was never meant for me. Instead, Bayonetta's true destiny is not a female power fantasy at all.

Since the review embargo prevents me from going into detail, I'll instead describe what I loved about Bayonetta in the first two games, in hopes that a clever reader will understand what may or may not happen in Bayonetta 3. In the first two games, Bayonetta has no romantic arc or relationship, and since she's presented as a dominatrix, the extent of her sexual expression is oriented around self-pleasure. I always liked the idea of Bayonetta as eternally single, although my runner-up choice for her one true love would be Jeanne — plus, official game art and social media posts from the games' creators have suggested that Bayonetta and Jeanne are in a queer relationship. In any case, the Bayonetta I know and love doesn't tie herself down to a man, and she certainly wouldn't need to be rescued by one. Unfortunately, Bayonetta 3 ensures that one of the few female characters in a mainstream game who owns her sexuality must pay some sort of tax for the privilege. Meanwhile, Viola — who's dressed in a far less feminine outfit and who doesn't get ogled by the game's camera during cutscenes serves as a more PR-friendly Strong Female Character to slap on a video game box. Perhaps Bayonetta was simply too complicated, too sexual, too brazen. She had to get cut down to size. Luckily, I found plenty to enjoy before the game's closing cinematic twisted a knife in my heart. Jennifer Hale's take on the character, controversial as it may be, struck my ears as a perfectly serviceable echo of Hellen Taylor's initial two performances. The game's strongest element is the lightning precision of its combo-heavy combat, bolstered by power-ups and healing lollipops from the in-game shop. Bayonetta 3 introduces a whole new facet to combat that makes it significantly easier and more varied: Bayonetta can now summon a host of massive demonic entities to smack around her enemies. (Don't miss the skill trees for these demons and the themed weapons that come with each one; the leveling-up process is buried in submenus.) Bayonetta 3 also occasionally puts you in the shoes of Viola, who wields a katana and shares Bayonetta's



Witch Time slo-mo ability, although Viola triggers it through parries rather than dodges. I never felt quite as comfortable or powerful when playing as Viola as I did Bayonetta, but that seemed on brand for the witch in training who lacks the confidence and power of her foremothers Bayonetta and Jeanne. I loved her slapstick comedy bits and her tendency to lightly slap herself in the face when willing herself to concentrate. Then there's Jeanne, who's playable in a series of 2D stealth missions that feel unlike anything else in the game — almost like *Mark of the Ninja* or *Invisible, Inc.*, albeit much simpler. I prefer pummeling my enemies rather than sneaking up on them (Jeanne does have the ability to take down her foes the old-fashioned way), but I also found it surprisingly fun to attempt some patient sneaking. These missions also provided a nice break for my hand muscles, given the combat-heavy nature of the rest of the game. Meeting versions of Bayonetta from other parts of the multiverse didn't make much sense, but it did prove to be entertaining as hell. They didn't come across as interdimensional beings so much as just Bayonettas from around the world; there was an ancient Egyptian Bayonetta, who's dressed like a witchy version of Cleopatra, and then there was an 1800s French cabaret Bayonetta, who's dressed for a performance at the Moulin Rouge. As for why each of these other Bayonettas (as well as Jeanne, Enzos, and so on) hailed from these particular locations and time periods, who knows? And who cares? It was just plain fun to meet them all and see the goofy variations on their personalities and power sets, even though I could have done without hearing all of the voice actors' abysmal French accents.

# BAYONETTA FULFILLED A FANTASY FOR PLAYERS WHO CRAVED AN UNAPOLOGETICALLY FEMININE PROTAGONIST

Between Bayonetta, Viola, and Jeanne, Bayonetta 3 is a well-rounded beatdown with a diverse range of combat styles and plenty of ways to mix up how you play, ensuring that you'll never get bored. Just like Bayonetta and Bayonetta 2, the game scores player performance at the end of each level, encouraging you to replay every mission until you get the coveted Platinum ranking. So then why, upon completing this game, did I immediately uninstall it? Well, reader, as I've said before, I can't reveal all the details of why. All I can do is tell you how much Bayonetta has meant to me over the years, particularly when I first started out as a games critic back in 2007 — one of the few women in the field at the time. When I first saw ads for Bayonetta back then, I assumed she'd be just another sexpot designed with straight male gamers in mind — like Lara Croft, or Samus Aran in a bikini that gets smaller and smaller depending on the player's efficiency and skill. These were female characters that I related to despite the fact that their bodies were presented as sexualized rewards. And in the first Bayonetta, too, I noticed the way the camera panned lovingly over the heroine's breasts and butt during cutscenes, assuming you were there purely to lust after her rather than to imagine yourself wearing those high-heeled gun stilettos yourself. And yet Bayonetta — much like Lara Croft and Samus Aran before her — got reclaimed and reinterpreted by many, including yours truly, as an empowering fantasy. In Bayonetta's case, the fantasy also involved in-your-face femininity plus dominatrix trappings; as the witch dodged her foes, she'd condescendingly croon, "So close!" Her powers were undeniably, unavoidably sexual; her skintight black suit is actually made out

of her own hair, which she can fashion into fists that beat back her enemies, leaving her body naked in the process. The stronger the attack, the more naked she becomes. Could something like that ever be empowering, critics wondered? Was this not the ultimate expression of straight male desire and the sexual objectification of women? At the time, I countered that Bayonetta had also fulfilled a fantasy for those players who craved the chance to inhabit an unapologetically feminine protagonist. The ponytail, the lollipops, the lipstick, and the stilettos were worlds away from the gruff Marcus Fenixes and Master Chiefs of the era, and the further decision to make Bayonetta a dominatrix added a new layer to the fetishization in play here. Sure, this witch was somebody's fantasy, but she was not exactly a normative one. I also loved how, even though Bayonetta made a deal with the literal devil in order to get her witch powers, eternal damnation never seemed like the end of her road. That's because even though Bayonetta's mom was also a witch, her dad was a Lumen Sage — meaning he works for the heavenly powers that be, not the demons down below (Bayonetta's parents had a Romeo and Juliet situation going on). Since witches are a symbol of feminine power, Bayonetta's joy in the face of her future damnation always felt like a triumph—a rebellion. And yet I understood, all that time, why some of my friends didn't vibe with Bayonetta — yes, even my queer and female friends. There was just something that seemed... off. Something deep down that suggested that this heroine wasn't meant for us. That's because it turns out that Bayonetta was made with Luka in mind. Who the fuck is Luka, you might be asking? Well, I can't blame you, because

he isn't exactly an important part of Bayonetta and Bayonetta 2. He's a side character best described as a simp, although that slang term didn't get popular until years after Bayonetta 2's release. Better yet, I'll quote this description of Luka said by Loki in Bayonetta 2: "Hey, you're the pervert staring at Bayonetta's tits all the time. You really need to learn how to talk to a lady!" Throughout the games, Luka lusts after Bayonetta, constantly tripping over himself in his failed attempts to keep up on her adventures. He's no Lumen Sage or Umbra Witch; he's just a regular human being, without any superpowers or mystical destiny. My most charitable read on Luka is that he's an audience stand-in — but, of course, that isn't particularly charitable to the audience, since this characterization would paint them all as pathetic man-children who slobber after Bayonetta, incapable of matching her level of coolness and sexiness. I don't see myself as anything like Luka. I see myself as... well, Bayonetta. It's a fantasy, OK? Let me have this one! Except, of course, Bayonetta 3 doesn't let me have this one. Not the way that Bayonetta and Bayonetta 2 let me have it, anyway. In those games, Bayonetta was always the coolest person in the room, and mere mortals like Luka should've counted themselves lucky to breathe the same air. Yet inexplicably, in Bayonetta 3, Luka gains completely unearned power and importance. Why he's suddenly such a big deal, when previously he was little more than comic relief, amounts



to a big heteronormative shrug. I don't know what to tell longtime Bayonetta fans about this game, let alone the newcomers hoping to come aboard with this installment. If all you care about is button-ramming combat that's similar to Devil May Cry, you'll have a ball. But if you ever wanted to believe that there was something deeper to Bayonetta's story — some grander statement about femininity and sexuality and power dynamics — you'll find the truth to be quite a disappointment. Viola did tell me at the very beginning of this game that it would reveal this fundamental truth to me. I only wish I could have lived in ignorance for a little while longer.





# Persona 5: The Kotaku

By Kirk Hamilton

**Imagine your old high school.  
Picture the doors you'd pass  
through at the start of each day.**

See if you can recall the awkward conversations you had with your friends, or the smell of the cafeteria at lunchtime. Now throw all that in the garbage and replace it with something impossibly cooler, impossibly more stylish, impossibly better. That's Persona 5. It took me almost 100 hours to finish Atlus's new social-sim-role-playing game, and I enjoyed nearly all of them. Persona 5 is a thick slice of video game decadence, so sweet with style that I was happy surrender to it night after night. The menus in this game have more panache than some video games muster from start to finish. Even the loading screens have vigor to spare. This review originally ran 3/29/17. As the weeks wore on, my leisure time became a blur of blushing anime girls, wailing electric guitars, sexy demons, and heist movie hijinks. Was I consuming Persona 5, or was it consuming me? And if a game grabs my attention this confidently, does it really matter? My very short take on this very long game is: it's good. If you don't want to know anything else about it, fair warning that from here on out this review will contain spoilers for the first several hours of the game. I'll talk a bit about various cast members, the way the story is structured, the powers and abilities you unlock, that kind of thing. No major story spoilers beyond the first act, of course. I found Persona 5 to be comfortingly predictable on the whole, but that doesn't mean it wasn't fun to let it occasionally surprise me. Persona 5 is the latest in a long-running series of similarly titled Japanese role-playing games. In it, you spend half your time managing the day-to-day

life of a Japanese high school student, and the other half exploring extra-dimensional dungeons and engaging in turn-based combat against a Monster Manual's worth of freaky beasts. Persona 5 resolutely follows in the footsteps of its most recent predecessors, 2006's Persona 3 and 2008's Persona 4. In particular, its creators seem to be consciously attempting to replicate Persona 4's path toward cultural phenomenomdom. Expect spin-off anime, tie-in dancing and fighting games, themed merch, cat plushies, and crossover events for the foreseeable future. Once more you are put in control of a soft-spoken Japanese teenage boy who has arrived in a new town for a year of temporary residence. Once more you name him; once more you barely hear him speak. Once more you uncover dark, supernatural goings-on that only you can stop. And once more you make friends with a group of wacky misfits, teaming up and combining your supernatural powers to fight evil. There are some small but noteworthy twists to the formula this time around, but if you played Persona 4, much of this new entry will feel familiar. The Persona games all technically share the same fictional universe, though like its predecessors, Persona 5 sets its own rules and tells its own standalone story. In the world of Persona, corrupted demonic "shadows" lurk in a parallel dimension, just out of sight. The good guys fight them by summoning Personas—spectral avatars from the far reaches of pop culture, Jungian psychology, and Japanese folklore. One character may

summon a glowing cartoon Zorro, while another calls upon the Shinto god Take-Minakata. Each Persona is meant to represent one of the metaphorical masks we all wear, the version of ourselves that we hold up to the public. In the heat of the moment, most of that symbolism falls away. Personas let you blast monsters with lightning, and that's what matters. Much of Persona 5 comes down to efficient schedule management. (It's more exciting than it sounds.) You attend classes by day, then after school you make a choice: do you go to your job at the flower shop, or do you head into an alternate dimension and do battle? Or maybe you just want to hang out with that cute fortune-teller girl you met in the seedy part of town? Which activity will yield the greatest dividends, and which will feel like a waste of time? On a given day you are usually given two blocks of time to fill: the after-school block and the evening block. Whatever you decide, you're necessarily setting aside your other options for another day. Choose to go to the batting range after school and you won't have time to visit the sexy doctor you've befriended. Spend your evening reading or making thieving tools and you'll miss out on the chance to be interviewed by a local crime reporter. And if you spend the day dungeon-crawling and demon-fighting, you'll be too tired in the evening to do anything but sleep. With each passing day, the game's calendar moves forward, inexorably pushing you closer to the conclusion. You have a couple hundred days; do with them what you will. Persona 5 is defined by a peculiar sort of restricted freedom. You have copious options within a rigidly defined structure, and time is always running low. That arrangement can make the game feel both liberating and stressful. It



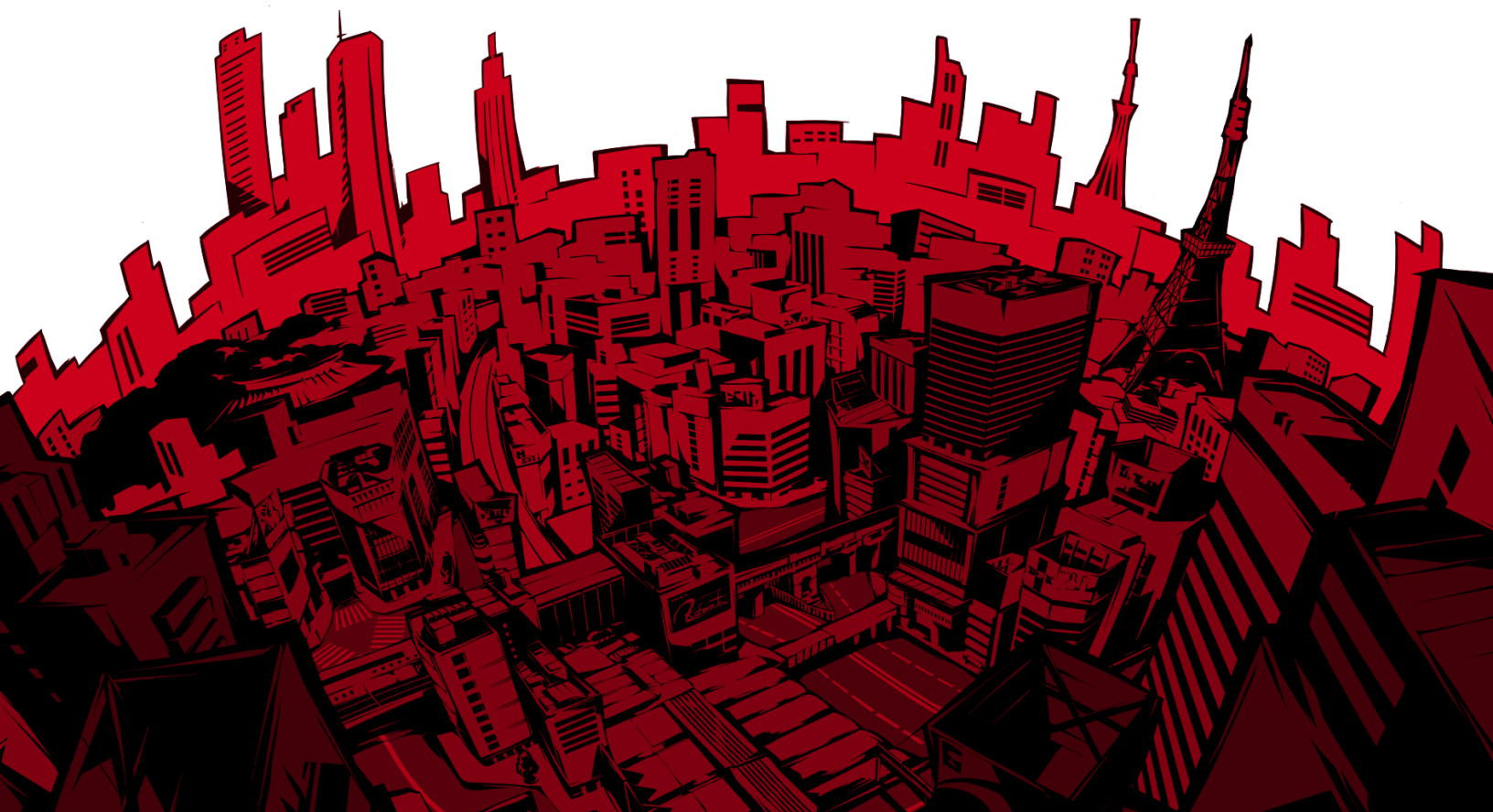
frequently delivers on the promise of letting you live a life in someone else's shoes, but with the attendant stress that would accompany managing someone else's schedule. The fate of the world is at stake, but don't neglect your part-time job! Persona 5 is one of the most stylish video games I've ever played. It restlessly pulses toward the corners of your TV screen, as if unable to contain its overabundance of verve. This game doesn't run, it bounces, helped along by a giddy and unusually cohesive audio-visual aesthetic. Each time you load the game, you're greeted with a hyper-stylized animated opening cinematic. As a pop vocalist sings a catchy tune about changing the world, the main characters leap and dance across a black-and-crimson cityscape. The opening credits list only three names: director Katsura Hashino, artist and character designer Shigenori Soejima, and composer Shoji Meguro. That's the same creative trio who headed up the two previous Persona games, as well as 2011's stylish sex thriller Catherine, which they made after completing Persona 4. In the ever-shifting world of video game development, it's rare to see a creative team stay together for more than a decade, and Persona 5's unusual self-assuredness is surely



the result of the core creative team's many years of working together. We've detailed Soejima's exceptional art on Kotaku in the past. Once more he has imbued his characters with an outsized, electric poise, even when they're standing still. Persona 5's take on Tokyo is brimming with life and detail, and I've never been happier to get lost and wander around in a subway system. Even the options menu crackles with energy. I can't think of another game that lists its composer third in the opening credits, but Shoji Meguro's work is such an integral part of Persona 5 that his prominent placement only makes sense. His score is the lifeblood of the endeavor, a thick mixture of pop, lounge, and funk that tirelessly pumps through the game's arteries. In the rare moments when the music stops, it's as if a city-sized heart has stopped beating. As the hours stack up, Meguro's music grows more familiar until each individual composition starts to take on a ritualistic quality. Now we have the Groovy Plan-Hatching Music, then the Surprising Turn Of Events Theme, and after that the Guitar Solo Of Emotional Catharsis. Over and over they play, until you could close your eyes, mute the dialogue, and still have a pretty good idea of what's happening. Hours after starting the game, I was still bopping my head with a stupid grin plastered across my face. What a pleasure. Aside from its killer sense of style, Persona 5's story is its greatest strength. There's no slow build, no how-do-you-do: this one hits the track at high velocity. Curtains go up as your character, clad in a svelte black trenchcoat and a carnival masque, is running point on a casino heist. The jig is up, and the cops are closing in. You flee down darkened hallways, leaping and pirouetting, fighting off your opponents as you frantically make your way toward the exit. All the while the voices of your mysterious, code-named teammates cheer you on over your radio. Just as you're about to make your dramatic escape, a calamity! The cops have you cut off. Your character is beaten to the ground and handcuffed. As they hoist you to your feet, a police officer gleefully informs you that one of your own team sold you out. You're hustled to a subterranean interrogation room, drugged, and brutally beaten. It's a harsh scene that sets the tone for the game that follows. (If you're not okay with teenagers being subjected to violence and extreme emotional distress, this might not be your game.) A sharp-eyed prosecutor elbows her way in to see you, and before long the two of you are seated across a table from one another. Who, she demands to know, are the Phantom Thieves? Woozy and bloodied, your character looks at her with quiet fury. You're clearly their leader,

she says, but what is your plan? How did you end up here, and what were you trying to do? If you've watched many crime movies, you probably know what happens next. In fades the sound of a ticking clock and the sight of a calendar moving backward. All at once it's almost a year prior, and your character is just arriving at his temporary new home in the backstreets near Shibuya, Tokyo. He's never heard of the Phantom Thieves, and his life as a criminal mastermind has yet to begin. Thus Persona 5 establishes its frame-narrative structure. Every so often, the game will pause and flash forward as your interlocutor presses you for more information. It's a shopworn narrative device, but it adds a necessary amount of structure to a story that is otherwise prone to wandering. Given that this game lasts about as long as all seven seasons of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, it needs all the structure it can get. Your character arrives in Tokyo with a checkered backstory. He's on probation, his punishment for stepping in and stopping the sexual assault of a woman by a mysterious but politically

connected man. The woman changed her story and accused you of misdoing, and for some reason the cops looked the other way. Disgraced, you're sent to spend a year living out of sight with a friend of the family, an old grump named Sojiro. He puts you in the attic above his coffee shop, warns you about stepping out of line, and leaves you to your own devices. Of course, on your very first day of school, you realize that something's rotten in the state of Tokyo. You find a mysterious app on your phone and, after using it, you and a troublemaker from school named Ryuji stumble into an alternate dimension. Your school has transformed into a magical castle, filled with torture rooms and armor-clad guards. The whole operation is overseen by the castle's "king," a faculty member named Kamoshida who has been abusing his position of power to take advantage of students. You and Ryuji manage to fight your way out of the castle and back to the real world, but you're unable to simply leave it at that. Kamoshida's twisted metaverse castle is a reflection of his real-world abuses. He's been cruelly



taking advantage of students for years. Someone's gotta do something. Persona 5's introduction lasts five or six hours, during which you'll befriend another couple of teammates, further explore Kamoshida's castle, and learn more about what's going on. A helpful talking cat named Morgana (just go with it) explains that when a person's desires become distorted enough, they project a "palace" around them into the metaverse. That palace is representative of how they see themselves and the world around them. In this case, Kamoshida sees your school as a castle, and himself as the king. All the students are his subjects to be tortured, toyed with, or disposed of as he sees fit. None of this is happening in reality, mind you. The real Kamoshida is an abusive dick, but he has no idea about his palace. The guy controlling his castle is merely his shadow self, and the enemies and victims within are merely projections of his subconscious. The whole concept shares quite a bit with Christopher Nolan's psychological heist thriller Inception, albeit with less philosophical muttering and more latex catsuits. In order to destroy a palace and stop the person controlling it, you must first make your way to the heart of the compound, where you'll find their "treasure." The treasure is a symbol, usually the thing that embodies whatever desires have twisted the palace's owner in the first place. You have a couple of weeks to steal Kamoshida's treasure before he has you and Ryuji expelled. (Each palace works like that; there's always a deadline.) Successfully stealing a person's treasure is the same as stealing their heart. They'll immediately realize how wrong they've been, turn themselves in, and otherwise seek justice for the ills they've brought on those around them. The good guys will win by making the bad guys

realize how bad they've been. A couple of weeks into the school term, you've teamed up with Ryuji, Morgana, and a third classmate Ann to form a vigilante group called The Phantom Thieves. You're dedicated to stealing the corrupted treasures of the wicked and powerful, changing their hearts and reforming society by force. You even have a fansite (dubbed "The Phan-site"), though at first no one even believes you exist. Thanks to the in medias res intro, you already know things will escalate. The question is only how. Here at the beginning, you're just some kids with magical powers, trying to do the right thing. That's a lot of rules and lore to keep straight, but Persona 5 does a surprisingly good job of establishing and sticking to them. Throughout the year, the Phantom Thieves take on an ever escalating rogues' gallery, each member of which is introduced during a flash-forward interrogation scene. The narrative structure makes it much easier to keep everything straight. Only toward the end does the story begin to spiral. Its scope escalates beyond the disciplined boundaries established in the early goings and finally, perhaps inevitably, succumbs to bloat. Without the structure that served the narrative so well for the first 85 hours, it loses focus and momentum. After watching the game lurch into its final destination, however, I can still easily recount what happened from start to finish. I can tell you the heroes' and villains' motivations and articulate their individual arcs. I can clearly explain the full story behind what was happening. Twisted though the route may sometimes be, the Persona train does a surprisingly good job of staying on the tracks. Each major activity in Persona 5 interlocks with the others, adhering to a coherent, overarching design. You explore dungeons



and level up by fighting ever-more-powerful monsters. You socialize with your friends and improve your “social link,” a 1-10 rating that has the side benefit of increasing each character’s combat prowess. You read books and go to movies to raise your protagonist’s social stats like Charm and Guts, which unlock new social options in the real world. And you capture and develop a stable of your own Personas, combining them into new, more powerful avatars to take into battle. The brilliance of the Persona series has long been how tightly those individual systems fit together. You’re motivated to improve your social connections because of how much those stronger friendships can help you in combat. That is a neat mechanical expression of how, as your relationships improve, you and your friends are able to work together more effectively. Your strongest allies will be able to shake off status ailments, swap out for one another in the heat of battle, and even leap in and take an otherwise fatal hit on your main character. Progressing a character’s social link also lets you get to know more about them—

who they are and what drives them. By the end of the game, I had formed an unstoppable fighting force by teaming up with the characters I’d gotten to know best. Combat in Persona 5 is most easily described as Rock, Paper, Scissors. It’s more accurately described as Rock, Paper, Scissors, Nuke, Psy, Curse, Gunshot, Bless. Every spell and attack does some sort of specific damage, be it fire, ice, or something more esoteric like “psy” or “nuke.” Enemies use Personas, too, and each Persona has its own strengths and weaknesses. One demon may reflect fire damage back on the caster but be weak to ice, or may reflect all magic damage but be weak to physical attacks. If you can hit an enemy’s weakness, you’ll put them into a downed state and get a bonus turn. Down all of your foes and your four-person team can launch an “all-out attack” for huge damage. If you’re doing it right, you should be able to end the majority of encounters before your opponents even have a chance to counterattack. The combat system starts out simple but unfolds into a complex, satisfying collection of moves and counter-moves. You’ll need to use your instincts to survive, especially when you’re up against unfamiliar foes. There’s no overarching view of the battlefield, nor even a skill that lets you plan more than one move ahead. As a result, Persona 5 combat has a scrappy, reactive flow. It makes for lively, interesting encounters with the potential for unexpected, dramatic shifts in the tide of battle. A fight against a new foe begins with an exploratory phase where you try to suss out their strengths and weaknesses. It’s an enjoyably tense process, particularly as you begin to develop a sixth sense for what might work. Sometimes it’s as easy as noticing that an enemy has white skin, blue hair, and opened with an ice spell. Probably a good idea to try fire, in that case. Other times you’ll see red-striped skin and skull tattoos and decide give a bless spell a shot. Once you know what you’re up against, fights become more predictable and strategic. Each of your party members specializes in one sort of damage, so you’ll want to divvy up attacks across your team in order to maximize your attack power without draining anyone’s precious magic points. If I hit this enemy’s weakness and pass my bonus round to Ann, she can heal me, then Morgana can use a

wind spell to knock out the other enemy. Fights against powerful bosses and sub-bosses allow for more complex strategies, since you’ll need to survive a dozen or two rounds of combat against a powerful enemy with a massive health bar. You’ll have to take into account the potential for buffs, debuffs, status afflictions, elemental weaknesses, social rank bonuses, and more just to get the upper hand. I played through the game on normal difficulty and for the most part found it to be challenging without being overwhelming. The sharpest difficulty spike hit during the second palace, where the final boss leveled my team a good three or four times before I finally worked out how to beat him. By the end of the game, conversely, my party had become overpowered. The final run of bosses was primarily challenging because of how long it took to beat them all. You can resurrect a downed party member in combat, but if your main character goes down, it’s game over. That rule is a holdover from previous games in the series, and it can feel overly punishing and retrograde. On the one hand, it forces you to build strategies around keeping your protagonist alive at all costs. On the other, it leads to some cheap game-overs. In the back half of the game, enemies begin to cast irritating spells that are capable of instantly killing any character. This led to a number of frustrating losses that occasionally cost me upwards of an hour as I retraced my steps from the last time I saved. For the most part, however, this Persona happily files down many of the barbs and sharp edges left over from Persona 4, which performed a similar softening to the frequently brutal Persona 3. Save points usually turn up at fair intervals, and if you lose a boss fight, you’ll start right from the beginning of the fight itself. If an enemy is too easy, you can just press a button to auto-fight them. If you ambush a low-level monster, you’ll often instantly defeat them without even going into combat, which saves a lot of time. Persona 5 includes two lower difficulties for those who would rather focus on the story. The regular “easy” difficulty substantially reduces the challenge of fights, and “safe” difficulty makes it impossible to lose. You can also change difficulty at any time, if you want. I like Persona 5’s combat on the whole, but I found the characters and story to be by far the more compelling portions of the game. I appreciate that the developers included options for people who just want to know what happens next without churning through



another four hours of combat. In Persona 4, the dungeons you fought through were mostly based on the subconscious manifestations of your own friends and party members. Persona 5 switches its focus: most of the palaces in the metaverse are distinctly villainous, constructed around a series of powerful criminals and antagonists. It's a nice twist on the formula. You'll uncover psychological manifestations of the villain's twisted misdeeds, all while their shadow self periodically turns up to taunt you en route to a final showdown. The palaces themselves, which take many hours to complete, are delightful. Each revolves around an iconic heist locale—a medieval palace, a casino, a bank—which lets the game's creators go wild with new and surprising puzzles, challenges, and gimmicks. One palace may task you with figuring out the key codes for a series of locks, while another may challenge you with more straight forward geometric sequence-puzzles. Each locale has a distinct geography and layout. You'll frequently backtrack, chase down keycards, and even leave some dungeons to bypass a barrier by manipulating things in the real world. As you make your way through each new palace, you'll want to keep out of sight and stick to cover. Don't mistake this for a stealth game, however. If you stay in cover you'll be able to ambush unsuspecting enemies, which lets your entire party take the first turn in combat. Most of the time, that's all you need to win. It works fine once you get used to the touchy controls and the camera, which springs from left to right like a hypercaffeinated hummingbird. But Persona 5 is far from a well-tuned stealth game. Enemy AI is dim-witted and easy to exploit, and given how often I found myself in frustrating situations due to the bad camera and jittery controls, I was happy to do so. Palaces eventually begin to take on a hint of the twisting, doubling-back

geography of a Resident Evil or Dark Souls level, with shortcuts that will help you skip whole swaths of a dungeon the next time you return. At various points you'll uncover safe rooms, which let you pull your gang together, save the game, and catch a breather. If you decide to stop for the day, you can return to your most recent safe room the next time you're back, and if you die in battle, you'll be kicked back to your most recent save. In between palaces you can plumb the depths of "Mementos," a seemingly endless network of interconnected demonic subway tunnels beneath Tokyo. You'll cruise through procedurally-generated hallways in search of the next down escalator, occasionally getting blocked by a door that'll only open once you complete a new chapter in the story. As much as I liked dungeon crawling in Persona 5, I wasn't really a fan of Mementos. It's meant to be a middle ground between the time-limited, structured story palaces and the relaxed daytime social game, but I could never quite fit it comfortably into my schedule. The procedurally generated levels are dull when compared with the more vivacious story palaces, and a visit to Mementos means sacrificing an afternoon and evening of social time. I rarely found myself setting aside time to make any progress. As a result, I wound up waiting to visit Mementos until I was grossly over-leveled, then blasting my way through a dozen or so floors before hitting a time-gated dead end or stopping out of boredom. Mementos' dullness only stands out compared with how lively and interesting the story palaces are. Those palaces just get better as the game goes, too, with increasingly involved gimmicks and traps leading you on clever, circuitous routes to the treasure. The final couple of dungeons are a bit of a disappointment, coinciding with the point where the story overreaches and loses focus. But just like with Mementos, the less impressive stuff



only seems that way when compared with Persona 5 at its terrific best. As much as I liked Persona 5's story and characters, I would have preferred that it adhered less slavishly to established tropes: JRPG tropes, heist movie tropes, and most of all Persona tropes. I found the new cast members, likable though they may be, to be overly familiar archetypes too obviously lifted from previous Persona games. There's the overachieving class president, the grumpy parental figure, the no-nonsense cop, the sheltered daughter of a captain of industry, the sexy but immature teen model, the amnesiac animal sidekick, and even the ace kid detective. And of course there's the loudmouth bro sidekick, played this time around by the fallen track star Ryuji. Ryuji is a pain-in-the-ass type who, between loudly ogling the lady Phantom Thieves, cursing way too much, and constantly losing his temper and blowing the team's cover, failed to win me over. The Phantom Thieves should've sidelined his ass back in May and been done with it. Fortunately, Ryuji's boorishness is ably countered by standout party members like Futaba, an agoraphobic young hacker who joins the Thieves in exchange for their help re-acclimating her to social situations, as well as the eccentric, endearingly oblivious artist Yusuke. Unexpectedly, the talking cat Morgana also manages to regularly steal the show. Ably voiced by actor Cassandra Lee Morris, Morgana accompanies the main character everywhere he goes. The little cat usually makes his presence known by piping up while popping out of the protagonist's school bag. Because the protagonist barely speaks, Morgana picks up a lot of the dialogue slack, acting as the designated Jiminy Cricket. The cast expands well beyond the kids who join your team, and you can pursue social links with all sorts of other Tokyo residents. Some of these folks are fairly run-of-the-mill, like a prodigy gamer who shows you new pistol moves and a phony fortune teller who nonetheless detects the truth of your destiny. A few awkwardly play into the game's indulgent hetero schoolboy fantasy, like a sexy female teacher with an unusual second job and a ridiculously attractive lady doctor who asks for your help with her clinical trials. The best ones, like the young Shogi prodigy who grants you crucial combat abilities, are worth seeing all the way to the end. At its most ambitious, Persona 5's social simulation expands beyond Tokyo and onto the Internet itself. The game consistently concerns itself with the mood of the in-game society as a whole, and can be clever in how it depicts it. Each loading screen displays the wandering thoughts of the anonymous masses; they ponder the latest political or pop-culture happenings, muse on the identities of the Phantom Thieves, and react to whatever's happening in the story. In the bottom

corner of the screen, you'll get a sense of how the public feels about you from the latest poll on the Phantom Thieves' fan site, underscored by a constant text crawl of anonymous comments. At first the overheard chatter and "LOL delete this" comments struck me overly obvious. Why was everyone only talking about the Phantom Thieves? Didn't they have inner lives? The longer I played, however, the more I liked it. As much as Persona 5 explores familiar anime themes of finding your inner strength and standing up to adversity, it also takes specific aim at the fickle whims of modern society as a whole. Your opponents soon graduate from teachers and small-time gangsters to titans of industry and all-powerful political leaders. Eventually the Phantom Thieves are waging a global ideological war, and the world is watching. The reactions of the public play a crucial role in the heroes' successes and failures, and a crucial thematic role in what the game is trying to say about humanity as a whole. It's a hell of a lot for a video game to tackle at once, and while Persona 5 may not fully stick the landing, it's a valiant attempt. At its most basic, Persona 5 offers the fantasy of a perfect teenage life. With a little help from the Internet and a willingness to reload your saves, you could live this year in the "best" possible way. Google every answer on every pop quiz; reload your saves until you give that cute girl the perfect present. Optimize your combat efficiency; optimize your free time. Max your stats by the fall, and your love life by winter. The purest fantasy of all is that your character is apparently so amazing, all he needs to do is show up. His friends will follow him into combat, look to him for guidance, and even fall head over heels in love with him, all while he mostly just stands there looking thoughtful. If only high school had been so easy! When Persona 5 is loading, you'll see your character's face in the corner of the screen accompanied by three words: "Take your time." I initially found this welcoming, like the game was urging me to relax. But as the hours passed, that calming promise proved false. I couldn't actually take my time. In fact, I probably didn't have time to do everything I wanted to. If I didn't fastidiously manage my schedule, I'd leave some friendships untended in the end. Then I remembered that the Phantom Thieves' catch phrase is "take your heart." It's a taunt, a promise that they're coming to steal your heart and change it. In that context, the loading screen text made a little more sense.

***This game will take many, many hours of your time. In exchange, you'll get a terrific, pulpy story told with style to spare. Persona 5 took nearly 100 hours of my time, and I gave it gladly.***



NO **BULL.** JUST **ENERGY.**



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